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Transgressive drinking practices and the subversion of proscriptive alcohol policy messages



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ABSTRACT

This research makes a new contribution to alcohol policy practice and theory by demonstrating that transgression of officially sanctioned norms and values is a key component of the sub- and counter cultural drinking practices of some groups of young consumers. Therefore, policy messages that proscribe these drinking practices with moral force are likely to be subverted and rendered counter-productive. The qualitative analysis draws on critical geography and literary theories of the carnivalesque to delineate three categories of transgression: transgressions of space and place, transgressions of the body, and transgressions of the social order. Implications for alcohol policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Mass consumption is often identified with conformity, yet transgression also plays an important role in consumer motivation (Desmond, McDonagh, & O'Donohoe, 2000; Heath & Potter, 2005). Consumer transgression of norms and rules need not be motivated by the prospect of economic gain, but for reasons of identity positioning. To transgress is to go “beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention....to violate or infringe” (Jenks, 2003, p.3). Advertising and marketing offer discursive resources for the production of consumer identities through creative or adaptive consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 1995). The outright rejection of consumption can also be constitutive of identity positioning, in the form of an anti-consumption identity positioning (Cherrier, 2009). Marketers are astute in exploiting the transgressive dynamics of some consumer groups, by tapping into sub-cultural and counter-cultural consumer movements (Frank, 1997). By so doing, marketers seek to co-opt sub- and counter-cultural consumer practices by structuring them ideologically (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). For example, many new branded alcohol drinks were

promoted in the UK in the 1980s as if they had implied psycho-active properties at a time when the government was intensifying the policing of the illegal and drug-infused rave culture (Measham, 2004; Measham & Brain, 2005), thus tapping into an element of sub-cultural capital.

Drinking in the West has a history of facilitating a convivial ‘time-out’ from everyday social rules and structures, yet it is also associated with social harms when drinking practices are seen as excessive or uncontrolled (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Berridge, 2013). UK government policy has systematically de-regulated the sale and marketing of alcohol over the past thirty years (Nicholls, 2009) and combines approval of the “positive impact” of “moderate” drinking (HM Government, 2012, p 3) with condemnation of those who “drink to get drunk” (p 4). As a result of trying to mediate between the market needs of suppliers, many of whom are directly involved in alcohol policy formulation (Moodie et al., 2013), and public health priorities, certain drinking practices that are constituted as harmful or dangerous are effectively criminalised by policy (Moore & Measham, 2012) and the individuals who indulge in them are constituted as reckless or irresponsible (Hackley, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2008). The distinction between acceptable and unacceptable drinking practices is not necessarily clear because of the variability in definitions of excessive ‘binge’ drinking (Herring, Berridge, & Thom, 2008) while drinking practices themselves are inflected by discourses of class and gender (Brown, 2013). As a result, there is a potentially mixed message or double

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standard in proscriptive policy messages (Hobbs, Winlow, Hadfield, & Lester, 2005) that characterise transgressors of desired norms in terms of a moral deficit (Hackley, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Mistral & Szmigin 2011) but ignore the ways in which extreme drinking practices are constituted as fun and enjoyable by participants (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009a; Moore & Measham, 2012).

The possibility that transgression constitutes part of counter-cultural consumer behaviour poses a problem for alcohol policy. The proscriptive message that warns consumers to drink less or face moral condemnation and damaging consequences lacks resonance with the lived experience of consumers (Keane, 2009) and rests on an oversimplified picture of the complex messages and meanings that surround anti-drinking social marketing campaigns (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2014). Health policies form part of the constitution of drug and alcohol problems (Moore & Measham, 2012). Under neo-liberal alcohol policy (Haydock, 2014) government campaigns ostensibly seek to control un-sanctioned, carnivalesque drinking practices that potentially subvert official rules and controls. Proscriptive messages can unwittingly provide discursive material to support sub-cultural or counter-cultural identity positions. Consequently, government anti-drinking messages might exacerbate the very practices they seek to control in some counter-cultural consumer groups.

This research makes a new contribution to the understanding of alcohol policy by showing that the transgressive impulse is an important feature of some of the very drinking practices that neo-liberal policy prescriptions seek to address through proscriptive policy messages. The data sets used in this study remain highly salient as expressions of contemporary ways in which some young people use alcohol to negotiate counter-cultural identity positions within prevailing discourses of space, class, ethnicity and gender (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009b; Hutton & Wright, 2015; Roberts, 2013). The paper will now set the topic within a wider context of relevant literature to establish the theoretical framework, drawing on research in health and public policy, critical geography and theories of transgression.

1.1. Literature review

Concerns continue to be raised in the UK and worldwide about the health and social consequences of rising levels of alcohol consumption, with increasing rates of liver cirrhosis, and a greatly lowered mean age of sufferers (e.g. Harker, 2012; Matthews & Richardson, 2005; Matthews et al., 2015; Leon & McCambridge, 2006). The latest data available for England at the time of writing indicate that there were 1.2 million annual hospital admissions related to alcohol, some 15,500 people died from alcohol-related causes, and alcohol-related harm cost the UK National Health Service £3.5 billion annually (Public Health England, 2013). Many Western countries have seen evidence of determined drunkenness becoming a common behaviour for younger and younger people (Martinic & Measham, 2008) while others have seen a more nuanced evolution of patterns of harmful drinking, with youth “binge” drinking becoming less prominent but potentially harmful levels of in-home drinking amongst older consumers rising (Measham & Ostergaard, 2009). High levels of sessional alcohol consumption remain a normalised part of social life for some young people (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2014; Fry, 2010; Piacentini & Banister, 2009). Extreme alcohol consumption is perceived positively by many young Western adults, both male and female, as legitimate and autonomous behaviour that cements social bonds of friendship and belonging, generates fun and establishes identity (Griffin et al., 2009b) in ways that entail managed risk rather than unthinking hedonism (Szmigin et al., 2008).

For some young adults, drinking heavily amongst friends is not merely a transient rite of passage between youth and adulthood but forms a “more permanent socialising ritual...expressed in the night time economy, including group drinking rituals, fashion, music and

dance and drug cultures...” (Hollands, 1995, p. 6). Alcohol is deeply implicated in young adults’ phenomenological experiences of social life and ‘going out’ in the UK (Hayward, 2004; Hobbs, Lister, & Hadfield, 2000), although ‘priming’ with cheap alcohol often takes place at home before venturing into town for the more expensive clubs (Kuntsche & Labhart, 2012). Going out can be seen as a spatial practice (de Certeau, 1984) that has ideological undertones within a consumer cultural context. The integration of ideology and space is exemplified in drinking spaces, traditional bars and pubs and heavily branded urban drinking venues located, planned and policed specifically as spaces representing leisure (Hollands, 1995; Lefebvre, 1976; 1991; Roberts, 2013). Urban drinking zones have assumed considerable economic importance for UK local authorities but also entail massive costs in policing, hospital admissions and neighborhood disturbance (Chatterton & Hollands, 2001; Measham, 2004; Harker, 2012). Drinking practices that are characterised as excessive or immoderate are linked in policy discourse with individual irresponsibility, criminality and social harm (Hackley et al., 2008). Youth drunkenness in public spaces carries a transgressive force that can be seen as dissent rather than deviancy (Stanley, 1995) but is also bound up with the tension between criminality and the politics of transgression (Hayward, 2004; Campbell, 2012).

Transgression has been conceived as a universal impulse to exceed limits that is driven by a sense of the eternal (Bataille, 1988). It is also a necessary part of a functioning social system in that transgression both tests and maintains social order (Durkheim, 1964a,b; 1965 Gane, 2011) by reinforcing culturally and historically relative norms and limits. As individual behaviour, transgression can be seen not only as a matter of deviance, but as a “deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (Jenks, 2003, p.3) in the sense that transgressing the norm also cements its social significance. For example, government sponsored anti-drinking advertising campaigns in the UK and Australia have targeted women by portraying excessive drinking as un-feminine, yet apparently without any deterrent effect (Brown, 2013). The ideological dilemma of being feminine and also enjoying heavy drinking is discursively negotiated within existing ideological frames of femininity. Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley & Mistral (2012) find that young adult female drinkers are fully aware of the risks getting very drunk poses to their health, personal safety and their putative reputation, yet going out to get very drunk is constituted as a normative practice. Drunkenness and drunken behaviour are constituted as permitted transgressions against the convention that respectable (Skeggs, 1997) women do not get outrageously drunk, in spite of well-publicised social advertising campaigns warning of the dangers of excessive drinking in the night-time economy (Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Hackley, & Mistral, 2011).

Imposed social norms of femininity (Skeggs, 1997) have been represented vividly in some anti-drinking campaigns, for example in one UK campaign described by Brown and Gregg (2012) in which a young woman is portrayed preparing for an evening out by ripping her clothes, rubbing vomit in her hair, and snapping the heel off her shoe, with the strapline “You wouldn’t start a night out like this, so why end it that way?”. This example constitutes overt female drunkenness as a transgression of norms of female deportment, but it fails to acknowledge that such behaviour can be constituted as fun and enjoyable in drinking stories told to friends after the incident (Brown & Gregg, 2012;). The attempted co-optation of sub-cultural ideologies can be turned back on itself to reinforce the sub-cultural norm (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Transgressive consumption can be seen as a form of creative consumption that can be used to accomplish an identity position for the consumer. For example, the drinker who enjoys alcohol brand advertising but ignores the “drink sensibly” subtext and, instead, drinks to excess, might be expressing a form of anti-heroic resistant identity, as opposed to an ostensibly more conformist heroic identity narrative (Cherrier, 2009).

Some drinking practices are characterised as carnivalesque (e.g. Hackley, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Mistral, Szmigin & Hackley 2013; Hubbard, 2013) in the sense that alcohol, in large quantities, acts to

release drinkers from the restrictions of convention (and from neo-liberal self-control) in a carnival of transgression, of bodies, places and social roles. Haydock (2014), referring to English alcohol policy as a specific case, suggests that government anti-drinking campaigns over the past 20 years can be understood in terms of a neo-liberal mentality that seeks to control and suppress the carnivalesque. There is tension between state control of drinking, which generates profits, tax revenue and employment, and particular drinking practices. English alcohol policy has a long history of uneasy tension between the ideology of the free market and the need for social control (Nicholls, 2009) and, as noted above, there are persistent class and gender implications around alcohol policy discourse. Proscriptive alcohol policy messages, then, are received and interpreted in the light of complex cultural conditions. Carnival is a sanctioned and limited (Eagleton, 1981) subversion of conventional behaviour, characterised by drunkenness, debauchery, free association and the reversal of social hierarchies (Bakhtin, 1965, 1984). Transgression of imposed social convention is the most striking aspect of carnival, so official exhortations to behave moderately and sensibly with alcohol run directly counter to the ethos of carnival.

Spatial practices and transgression are linked in alcohol policy that connects drinking with youth and urban crime (Campbell, 2012). Drinking and drunkenness are “discursively and differentially constructed in different spaces and places” (Jayne, Valentine, & Holloway, 2008, p. 248) and entail movement in groups through urban environments of city centres, drinking zones, and clubs and venues which are transformed through drink into liminal zones (Hobbs et al., 2000). Urban spaces can be seen not as neutral but “products literally filled with ideologies” (Lefebvre, 1976, p.31). The drinking zones constructed in town and city centres by urban planners, licensing authorities and alcohol marketing chains in the UK can, in Lefebvre’s (1976) term, be constituted as “representations of space” since they are an official construction designed to control consumption. The spatial practices that actively produce such spaces transform them into “representational spaces”. Transgressions occur where the consumption practices enacted within these spaces are invested with a sense of autonomy and authenticity through, for example, informal association regardless of social position, or, more extremely, drunken violence, public vomiting or criminal acts.

Debord (1967)’s notion of the spectacle is the aggregation of the mediated images of consumption that make freedom and individuality so difficult to accomplish. The spectacle envelopes all aspects of life and subjugates it to the service of capital: “The spectacle is the acme of ideology because it fully exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life” (Debord (1967; p.117). Real life is that not lived in conformity to the spectacle, but since the spectacle cannot be evaded, resistance occurs in momentary reclamation of spaces and practices. As Jenks (2003) notes, “The possibility of breaking free from moral constraint in contemporary culture has become an intensely privatised project. As we recognise no bond we acknowledge fracture only with difficulty—how then do we become free of or different-to?” (p. 6–7). Spectacular images of consumption, including officially-sanctioned commercial and government-sponsored alcohol messages, are constitutive of consumer behaviours around alcohol. Carnavalesque (Haydock, 2014) practices can be seen as transgressions of official discourses of sensible and controlled public behaviour.

Coverley (2006) suggests that the neo-Marxist revolutionary politics of Debord (1967) and the literary trajectory of psychogeography meet in the work of J. G. Ballard (2004). Psychogeographical literature articulates the sense in which, as a result of life in advanced industrial societies, “our emotional response is blunted and we become unable to engage directly with our surroundings without the mediated images of television and advertising” (Coverley, 2006, p.116). The banalisation of everyday life and consumers’ attempts to recover a sensory engagement with the environment result in extreme behaviour that offers a cathartic release from the tedium of passive consumption and yet “mirrors the violent and sexualised imagery that surrounds us. The ‘spectacular’

society will, of its own accord, produce that element of unpredictable behaviour that Debord (1967) hoped to engineer” (p.117). However, in the work of Ballard (2004), the revolution promoted by the spectacle does not result in emotional salvation, but in a “full-scale descent into savagery...[and]...personal obsession” (Coverley, 2006, p.117). Transgression is seen in the genre of psychogeography as an intimate part of contemporary socio-psychology that is in part constituted through discourses of consumption, of alcohol, technology and space.

2. Method

This research draws on a larger funded study of the meaning of alcohol in the social lives of young people. Data sets were gathered between 2004 and 2007 and remain salient as expressions of drinking practices that, while not representative of all harmful drinking, nonetheless remain current practices amongst certain groups (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Brown, 2013; Hutton & Wright, 2015; Haydock, 2014). An initial phase explored the alcohol marketing landscape with an analysis of the ways in which drink and drinkers were represented in 216 print, broadcast and outdoor advertisements for different types of drinks. A subset of 20 advertisements were analysed in greater detail using a meaning-based approach (Parker, 2003), focusing on the key themes of gender, fun, identity, sexuality and social cohesiveness. The fieldwork entailed interviews and focus groups with 89 young adults aged 18–25 in three geographical locations in the UK. The participants included a range of gender, class, ethnicity and occupation. Participants were asked to discuss their social lives, and alcohol consumption emerged unprompted as a central feature. At the end of each group discussion participants (some of whom were non-drinkers or moderate drinkers) were shown a range of alcohol advertisements and asked to discuss them. The final part of the research involved 5 observational case studies of young people’s drinking activities in the 3 locations, followed by 8 individual interviews. The observational case studies, recorded in field notes by the research assistants, enabled the research to be informed by first-hand experience of the drinking spaces, marketing activities and young people’s drinking practices.

The in-depth interviews permitted more detailed investigation of key themes outside of the friendship group environment. The final data set consisted of 29 transcribed documents, affording a multi-perspective insight into the social lives of these young people. In the analysis for this paper, data mainly from two of the focus groups are used to aid narrative coherence and continuity. The direct quotes are examples of themes that emerged across the research team’s analysis of all the contextualised data sets. The initial data analysis was conducted within an interpretive textual frame (Thompson, 1996) and key phrases, metaphors and patterns of meaning were sought in order to reach a consensus on emerging themes. Themes from all the data sets were compared, discussed, contested and synthesised as discourses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

The data sets have been drawn upon to produce work focusing on, respectively, the calculated risk-taking of young people engaging in binge drinking (Szmigin et al., 2008); the policy focus on the moral deficit displayed by excessive drinkers (Hackley et al., 2008; 2011), the role of drinking stories in constituting social identity and cementing bonds within the friendship group (Griffin et al., 2009a,b); the use of social marketing around alcohol policy (Szmigin et al., 2011); the carnivalesque character of youth binge drinking (Hackley et al., 2013) and the negotiation of gender ideologies within the context of the UK’s drinking culture (Griffin et al., 2012). The present study broadens the theoretical scope of the analysis to shift into the wider and cross-disciplinary topic of consumer transgression and the reception of policy messages as aspects of sub- and counter-cultural consumer identities. The following section illustrates three forms of transgression that emerged from the datasets. Transcription conventions are adapted from Potter and Wetherell (1987).

3. Findings

3.1. Transgressions of space and place

Many of the drinking stories related in the discussion groups describe transgressions of domestic space, as in this one related by Sasha (19) and Cathy (18):

Sasha [my friend had this really massive party once and everyone was absolutely off their faces cos my friend Katie went on holiday (.) err her mum and dad went on holiday and everyone went round her house and we was mixing you know the really cheap like WKD (laughter) we were putting extra vodka (.) extra cheap vodka into it (laughter) =Cathy = ergh =Sasha = and we were all off our faces and two of my male friends got in (.) in her bath together (laughter) and (1) then proceeded to be sick while I was in the bath (more laughter) (2) and then everyone just (laughter) (2) someone ended up sleeping in the dog kennels out the back (more loud laughter)DC With the dog?Sasha With the dog yeah (.) and on the trampoline (laughter) and it was chuckingdown with rain...

The scenario illustrates a transgression of space that is the antithesis of urbane and benign advertised scenes of alcohol consumption. It acts as a striking subversion of the idea of officially sanctioned 'sensible' drinking. In the following story, the transgression occurs not in the micro-spaces of home, but in the urban spaces around drinking venues:

Connie My boyfriend got so drunk he was by the Flapper and Firkin we got drunk under the bridge and he was drinking that and erm (1) tequila (.) obviously (1) fell asleep in a flower bed (1) with erm like pink just dribbling down his face =Denise = oh no =Connie = and then and then he went(.) he got up and went away and he disappeared and I didn't see him and I decided to go home about three o'clock in the afternoon he said he'd fallen asleep on the Macdonald's toilet floor

Some of the drinking stories in the data sets hold an element of darkness and mystery, as drunkenness transforms human spaces into liminal zones (Hobbs et al., 2000). Some of the events described relate crime, and risk of serious harm with the whole experience rendered surreal by alcohol, as in the following quote:

Bill ...he was just drinking beer (.) he wasn't drinking spirits or anything (.) He'd had about five beers (1) I couldn't find him outside the club (1) went to meet him at three o'clock in the morning (.) to try and find him (1) He woke up outside an alley (.) then he woke up a second before he can remember he was three quarters of the way down Seatown Beach (.) where he woke up (.) and he had no shoes on and he was up to his (.) his chest in sand (.) and then he was (.) he didn't know where he was (1) so he er (.) he started walking up (.) all he could see was the lights (.) (yeah) (.) so he started walking up to the sea front and he passed out again (.)....¹

Twenty-one year old Bill's story above (related in a focus group of six white males of a similar age) goes on to describe the protagonist involved in violent attack and memory loss. It evinces a psycho-geographical literary narrative in the sense that it provides a "new means of experiencing the environment" and evinces "aimless wandering driven...by the force of the imagination in which the exotic...(is)

literally to be found on one's doorstep" Coverley (2006 p.46). There is a sense of the dark incongruity and deepened social encounters that can emerge from urban wandering. For Lefebvre (1976: 1991), the mental and the social collapse within urban spaces, including the micro spaces of domestic urban homes, and act to reproduce capitalist relations of power and domination. Debord's (1955; 1967) advocacy of "situations" refers to the use of spatial practices that challenge the moral and capitalistic order of power, such as riots or scandalous interventions in public ceremonies or public property. Subverting the imagery of the spectacle by transgressing official norms of behaviour in controlled spaces is seen as a way of reclaiming the essentiality of lived experience.

3.2. Transgressions of the body

The grotesque, carnivalesque body (Bakhtin, 1965) is vividly represented in the data sets. Mike (aged 25) explained that when he is "throwing up really bad" it feels like "your insides are killing themselves". Participants claimed that they knew when they'd 'had enough' to drink "when you're ill for days and days"... "when you can't see anything"... "when you can't feel your lips any more". The extent of alcohol consumption is played down by some, while extremely high consumption is recounted as a matter-of-fact by many others. One admitted frankly that "Every time I do it I absolutely annihilate myself" (Griffin et al., 2009a). Some drinking stories relate tales of alcohol-induced memory loss and many respondents refer to getting "smashed", "hammered", and "slashed" (Griffin et al., 2009b). The violent metaphors are reflected in many of the stories, as in the following:

Sasha The worst night I ever had was when (1) we went down with Andrew's brother and Andrew's and his brother's mate and erm Dan (.) his brother fell off the top of the stairs [gasps] and (2) (ohh) we had to drag him outside (.) he was absolutely paralytic we had to drag him outside and phone an ambulance (1) (mmm) and then (.) his mate got into a fight while I was outside and just like (.) it was just complete mayhem (mmm) (2) you just you got in and you think (1) was it worth it?

The data sets hold many tales of injury and hospitalisation. The risk and danger seem to offer a necessary setting for the dark carnival juxtapositions and liminal experiences. Other stories are related for comic effect amongst the friendship group, with both male and female participants recounting accidents with bodily fluids:

Rob the first time like he came round (.) he just walked in my Mum and Dad's room and had a piss up the cupboard (loud laughter) (1) he was he was (.) he just woke up and he was like (1) he thought he was in his own house like and he pissed in the cupboard (nice) (2) my mum and dad were like (continued laughter)Tiffany Nice to meet youRob He wasn't invited round for a few weeks (laughs)Molly recounts a similar story:Molly When I um first got with Dan we went out for a drink (mmm) and I got really drunk and I stopped round his (.) and I pissed on his radio (loud laughter) not the toilet (2) he just stood there (laughter)

There is much transgression of bodily control in the stories, vomiting, urination, falling over, sexual grotesquery, and general profanity. The following story is recounted to gales of laughter from the group:

Dawn = I got absolutely wrecked and then I got back (.) and I drank two bottles of red wine (laughter) and then somehow (.) you're all my friends so I'm gonna say this (laughs) uh I like shagged this bloke three times (loud laughter) and I didn't realise my mate was in the room (more laughter) my mate was in the room and then I was really confused and I walked I walked naked into my mate's parents bedroom (loud laughter) I thought it was the toilet (continued laughter) it wasn't as bad cos I was fifteen then so I would have been

¹ Transcription conventions adapted from Potter and Wetherell (1987).

= Indicates the absence of a discernable gap between speakers

(.) A pause of less than 1 s

(1), (2) A pause of 1 s, 2 s and so on

(...) Some transcript has been deliberately omitted

[DB laughs] Material in square brackets is clarifying information

They A word or phrase underlined indicates additional emphasis

[as you can Left square brackets indicates overlapping speech.

more embarrassed now and like (.) her dad just got up and took me to the toilet and then took me back again I was really really drunk (wow) (laughter)

Dawn constitutes her drunken excess as an amusing anecdote retold for the benefit of friends. The self-revelatory aspect might be problematic in other settings, but, as with other studies, such as Brown and Gregg (2012), Griffin et al. (2012)) and Day, Gough, and McFadden (2003), the intractable dilemmas of femininity are negotiated partly through the transgression of ideological norms, with alcohol framing the action. Transgressions of the body, including nudity, sexual indiscretion, vomiting and urination are evocative of Bakhtin's (1965) depiction of medieval carnivals, in which excrement and urine were sometimes thrown upon people of higher standing amongst scenes of general Bacchanalia. Bakhtin (1965) suggests that the grotesque body "protrudes, bulges, sprouts and branches off", whereas the classical body is a façade that cannot be penetrated (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 320; Stallybrass & White, 1986). Grotesque representation is inherently transgressive as it "exaggerates and caricatures the negative, the inappropriate" (Bakhtin, 1965, p.306). Some of the narratives in our data sets not only epitomise a rejection of bodily control and an implicit subversion/re-inscription of ideologised gender norms, but also illustrate other features of carnival (Hackley et al., 2013), such as the juxtaposition of incongruous situations and the leveling of social relations within a collapsed hierarchy. Self-parody is a feature of some of the stories, and, as the story above illustrates, this is not confined to the ritual assertive masculinity of male nudity, public urination and vomiting during drinking rites (Thurnell-Read, 2011). In the story above, feminine ideologies of deportment and rectitude are subverted and, yet, re-iterated, framed by extreme drinking.

3.3. Transgressions of the social order

Participants refer to the way alcohol loosens their inhibitions, and those of others (Griffin et al., 2009a). Conversely, remaining sober on a night out leads to a sense of exclusion from the fun (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2014; Piacentini & Banister, 2009). The normal social order of polite reserve and inhibition is subverted, with the help of alcohol. The following quote, from a group of young (18–25) white women, illustrates the social imperative of having drinking stories to share:

Carrie: you feel like you almost have to get drunk in order to (1) share the funny stories (1) cos next day you have them to talk about Toni: yeah Jude: I never really got on with my flat mates in the first year because (1) they had all these funny stories about their drinking nights and I thought (2) here we go (right) (1) erm (2) and because of that (1) I was really kind of (1) separate (1) separated (1) and it was horrible (hmm hmm) Carrie: yeah it's very much like that I think (.) it's all about like (.) what they (1) what everyone did last night (1) so in order to be in (.) if you like (.) you have]ABH/Int: [to have done something last night (laughter) Jude: something stupid

Other quotes are indicative of the way being drunk facilitated forms of social encounter that were not possible when sober. For example, Grant (19) refers to the way that when drunk

"= uh I tend to get more friendly (1) I talk to more people." The sociality of being drunk has two components: one is positive and refers to the disinhibition induced by drunkenness, which is such that in some clubs "you just go up to people and they tell you their life story", which is "brilliant". The negative aspect of sociality refers to the stigma of drinking alone.

Jo I couldn't go and stand in a bar on my own (.) I'd feel really awkward (.) there's nobody there with me to talk to whatever (1) (mmm) and you feel like people are watching ya (1) so I couldn't do it

Not drinking, or drinking alone, is constituted as a practice of situating oneself outside the conviviality of the group. People who fail to get drunk in this cultural context suffer a social penalty:

Cathy They don't get the jokes that you're telling them like (right) like if we've all got a joke going on (.) (yeah) she'll stand there and she won't know what's funny =DC = right =Cathy = and we're like (.) we're trying to explain but she just doesn't find it funny =Cat = they seem quite bored Cathy = mmm =DC = bored =Cathy = bored (.) it's like one of my mates is just like (.) just like just giving up drinking and erm (.) like when we've gone to the pub or something he'll just sit there and he just (1) he just doesn't seem to enjoy himself.

Drinking alone is constituted by participants as a social transgression in the sense that it violates an important group value. Yet, the intensity of social fun is heightened and made possible by the transgression of normal social inhibitions, which in turn is made possible by being drunk. The darker side of disinhibition is illustrated once again by stories of drink-fuelled violence:

Denise Oh god do you know that happened to my brother once before (.) because he used to be a biker (hmm) and he was he was just walking down this (1) road (.) he was going into a bar or something (1) and these blokes mistook him for someone else (.) cos they were all drunk (mmm) and cos he had a bike and they kicked his face in (.) and it like caved all his face in (.) he had to have it reconstructed and everything Sheila My god

Violent assault is constituted in the data sets as an ever-present risk for both male and female drinkers, and a further illustration of the capacity of alcohol to facilitate transgression of social norms. These experiences heighten the sense that alcohol opens the door to a carnivalesque world that is both darker and more exciting than the normal 'official' world and in which normal social rules and constraints are temporarily, and cathartically, suspended. The descent into extreme violence echoes the darker themes of psychogeographical narratives, and the turn to violence can happen in an instant, as in the following:

Terese At the (inaudible) school I was at the police showed a video in Solihull of this (.) over nothing (.) like these people have never ever committed any crime before (mmm) and they just all turned round to this one bloke and started beating the shit out of him and he was nearly dead

'Going out' is recounted as an experience that can, at any time, turn from calm enjoyment to horror. As one participant recounts, "it's not funny then but at the time..." meaning that even though the violent situations are grave, they also form part of a compelling theatre in which transgression, of place, of bodies, and of the social order, are made possible through alcohol. The risks of sexual or violent assault are treated with seriousness and not minimised, yet the stories are recounted as part of a wider parody of the tedium and predictability of 'official' life. The presence of genuine risk lends a dramatic tension and a transgressive frisson to the stories of the world turned upside-down and inside-out.

4. Discussion

Health policy does not stand outside the issues it purports to address, but is a part of how those issues are constituted and understood (Moore & Measham, 2012). The data suggest that transgression of official norms and rules is an inherent part of counter-cultural alcohol consumption for some groups, and therefore alcohol policy messages that ostensibly seek to dissuade targeted groups from engaging in certain drinking practices, may unwittingly contribute to the discursive constitution of those very practices.

The debasement of bodies described in the data sets has a wider social significance (Durkheim, 1964a,b; 1965). In Bakhtin (1965) the exuberant outpouring of bodily solids and fluids and the use of profane “Billingsgate language and parodic laughter” is linked more broadly to a sense of “birth, fertility, [and] renewal” (p.148). Carnival time unleashes a sense of “the death of the old and the birth of the new world” (p.149). Importantly, for Bakhtin, Rabelaisian satire is not merely focused on individual injustices but must be seen as a “negation of the entire order of life (including the prevailing truth), a negation closely linked to the affirmation of that which is born anew” (1965, p.307). The element of carnival as a source of renewal and opposition to the crushing oppression of feudal life seems to resonate with the carnivalesque tone of many of the drinking stories, yet in a contemporary cultural context. Bakhtin likens carnival to Roman Saturnalia: carnival is a lived spectacle that expresses an essence of freedom. “Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom” (Bakhtin, 1965, p.7). It is a mass experience and represents the power of the group to touch a transient and ephemeral sense of freedom, within a world “drawn out of its usual rut” and “turned inside out” and upside down (Bakhtin, 1984, p.122). Drunken transgressions, then, can be understood not merely as deviant but as socially functional behaviour that falls beyond the normal scope of state control within democratic societies.

Consumption is a site for identity work in many settings. Resistant and counter-cultural identity positioning (Cherrier, 2009) entails not only escaping market forces, insofar as that is possible (Kozinets, 2002) but also in transforming mundane, everyday life into something that confers a sense of authenticity through creative and adaptive consumption experiences (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Extreme drinking practices can be construed as transgressive in comparison to the anodyne spectacle of passive leisure drinking, and within the rationality and self-control of the neo-liberal order (Croghan, Griffin, Hunter, & Phoenix, 2006; O'Malley & Valverde, 2004). Policy discourses tend to emphasise risks associated with harmful drinking, but the re-negotiation of risk is a central aspect of the role of transgression.

“The nature of the risk, the threat, and the ways in which that risk is handled are most instructive concerning the moral bond and social structure of the society in question. Herein lies the artistry of transgression, the diagnostic role of transgression, and the value of transgression as a touchstone of social relations” (Jenks, 2003, p.33).

Neo-liberal policy messages (Haydock, 2014) that seek to constitute uncontrolled, carnivalesque drinking behaviour as risky and/or harmful, unwittingly engage the social mechanism of transgression and become constitutive of a social relation in which official instructions are there to be subverted. The transgression of policy proscriptions is therefore implied in proscriptive policy discourses.

5. Concluding comments

Excessive drinking is normalised amongst some groups in many Western economies, yet, as the data show, in some cultural contexts alcohol is seen to offer a powerful route into a liminal world of transgressive intensity. Transgression can be understood as a necessary part of social relations (Jenks, 2003), and health policy, as well as alcohol marketing and other discourses around alcohol, are constitutive (Moore & Measham, 2012) of those relations. Drinking practices are reinforced by prior experience and expectation (Wardell & Read, 2013) and drinking behaviours that are constituted as fun and enjoyable within re-negotiated discourses of gender and class can be highly resistant to proscriptive policy messages (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Griffin et al., 2012). Neo-liberal health policy (Haydock, 2014) entails public-private alliances that do not have a strong record of success, according to (Moodie et al., 2013): “As an alternative to regulatory measures, alcohol and food industries promote ineffectual individually targeted information and educational

approaches” while at the same time, deploying counter-messages through covert marketing (p.674). Policy proscriptions that warn of negative consequences of extreme drinking fail to engage with the lived experience of target groups (Keane, 2009) and fail to account for the resonance some consumption practices have with counter-cultural and sub-cultural identity positions (Cherrier, 2009).

Two main implications for alcohol policy follow from this research. Proscriptive policy messages that target drinkers who are involved in counter-cultural identity positioning reflect the stated aims of policy makers and producers and ignore the lived experience of targeted consumers. Policy strategies should acknowledge the inherent contradiction in proscribing behaviours that are actively pursued because they are proscribed. The lived experience of the target group should be more plausibly assimilated into creative executions. Alternatively, policy would be more effectively focused on other measures rather than proscriptive campaign messages, such as treatments for alcohol dependency, or on regulatory issues of availability, and pricing.

Secondly, given the resonance of transgressive drinking practices that this research has demonstrated for some consumer groups, commercial alcohol branding should come under closer scrutiny for any implied suggestion that taps into transgressive counter-cultural identity positions. Commercial alcohol branding is able to conform to regulatory codes of practice with its explicit content, but is not required to reveal the brand positioning or communication strategies to regulators. For example, much alcohol advertising portrays social situations of lively fun, but many young people feel that such situations are un-achievable when sober, since alcohol is necessary to release social inhibitions (Griffin et al., 2009a). Consequently, messages that portray social fun in juxtaposition with ‘sensible’ drinking are rejected by target groups because they are seen as unrealistic and hypocritical (Hobbs et al., 2005). The scenes of uninhibited social fun that are portrayed are not regarded as possible unless participants are drunk, hence there is an implicit wink of collusion in brand advertising that portrays social fun but carries a ‘sensible drinking’ tag. Under neo-liberal (Haydock, 2014) health and alcohol policy, government campaigns serve audiences that include manufacturers, retailers, legal and licensing officials, politicians, and voters, as well the consumers who are at risk. It may be that the need for campaigns to satisfy multiple audiences is part of the problem of message content that fails to resonate with the lived experience of consumers. Policy messages need to address target audiences with greater insight, rather than addressing the stated aims of clients.

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